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SUBJECT: Religious Freedom Varies for South China Expats

REFERENCE: A) Guangzhou 1301, B) Guangzhou 458

(U) Classified by Consul General Robert Goldberg for Reasons: 1.4 (b) AND (d).

11. (C) SUMMARY: Control over expatriate churches in south China -- ranging from heavy-handed to laissez-faire -- suggests that local governments have considerable latitude in how to interpret regulations on the practice of religion. Expatriate church members in Guangzhou report strict Religious Affairs Bureau (RAB) supervision, with government officials refusing requests for any new religious groups or church expansion. Leaders of the Xiamen International Christian Fellowship (XICF) describe a more cooperative relationship with the local RAB, where officials are open to church growth as long as restrictive rules are followed. Expats in Shenzhen laud the city's climate of relative religious freedom, with lax RAB supervision of international fellowships and rare Public Security Bureau (PSB) raids on underground churches. END SUMMARY.

Guangzhou RAB Fears Growth of Expat Religious Groups

12. (C) Fearing a sudden upsurge in expatriate church growth and concerned about any movement that would be unable to control, Guangzhou RAB officials have clamped down on any expansion, according to Alfred Leong (strictly protect), board member of the Guangzhou International Christian Fellowship (GICF). GICF is currently the only expatriate religious organization in the city that is officially permitted to hold meetings, Leong explained. Numerous other religious groups submitted applications to the Guangzhou RAB for official registration, but the requests from a Nigerian evangelical Protestant group, a Korean Presbyterian church, a Mormon fellowship, and an Islamic association were denied without explanation. As for GICF's own request for permission to find a larger space for Sunday services (ref B), Leong said RAB officials had privately told him that because they had denied other groups' applications, it would be unfair to give GICF any "additional special treatment." Leong said that from 2006 to 2007, average attendance at Sunday services had grown from 350 to around 500 people.

African Groups Face Harsher Treatment

13. (C) African Christians and Muslims experience a disproportionate amount of pressure from Guangzhou authorities, according to Fidelis Ogwu (strictly protect), a Nigerian GICF member and salesman for a Guangzhou electronics company. From March to July 2007, Ogwu explained, at least three Nigerian bible study groups meeting in private homes were raided by local PSB officers and were forced to

shut down (ref B). Unable to find other places to practice their faith, most group members ended up joining GICF, exacerbating the fellowship's overcrowding. While Ogwu hadn't heard of any additional crackdowns since July, he noted that Muslim African businessmen were denied permission to hold their own Islamic religious services and were forced to attend an officially-sanctioned mosque with other Chinese and Middle Eastern worshippers.

Xiamen's Expatriate Church: Cordial Relations with RAB

14. (C) Xiamen RAB officials are relatively flexible and allow the Xiamen International Christian Fellowship (XICF) to hold multiple Sunday services, weekday small groups, and issue its own badges, according to XICF Steering Committee Chairman Andrew Wong. The tradeoff, Wong said, was that XICF had to keep a file of passport photocopies for all attendees and follow requirements that local Chinese not attend activities. In reality, according to Wong, the Xiamen RAB rarely intervenes in the fellowship's affairs, and XICF's interaction with city officials is limited to two cordial dinner meetings per year. Wong said that XICF had used this climate of relative freedom to start a separate Chinese-language service for Taiwan and Singaporean expatriates. (Note: GICF leaders told us this would never have been allowed in Guangzhou. End note.)

15. (C) XICF started out as a small, unregistered expatriate house church, led by longtime resident and Xiamen University Business School professor William Brown. (Brown is also the author of a number of English-language books on Xiamen.) Initially serving Christians at the Xiamen offices of Kodak, Coca-Cola, and Cathay Pacific, in 2004 XICF applied for official recognition from the city RAB. Initially denied registration, Wong said that XICF members appealed the decision, claiming that a lack of religious services for expatriates would hinder foreign investment and complaining that it was unfair that other major cities were allowed to have international

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churches. After visiting Beijing and Shanghai's expatriate fellowships and holding discussions with religious officials there, the Xiamen RAB gave XICF official permission to meet. Wong said that Sunday attendance in 2007 had averaged around 160 people.

Shenzhen RAB: The Most "Laissez-Faire" of Them All

16. (C) Expatriate house church leader Newman Huang (strictly protect) described Shenzhen as a "surprisingly free" city for religious activities - for local Chinese as well as for foreigners. Huang, a sales director at VIA Technologies Shenzhen for the last four years, claimed that Shenzhen had between 4,000 and 5,000 individual underground church groups, most of them with congregations of 25 to 100 members. Huang said that many underground churches had both expatriates and local members, describing his own network of house churches as a mix of local professionals, Taiwan businessmen, and overseas Chinese. (Note: GICF and XICF leaders said that they are strictly forbidden from allowing local Chinese into their church services. End note.) Aside from one brief interrogation by a local police officer in 2006, Huang said that he had experienced no other pressure or oversight from RAB or PSB officials.

17. (C) Wayne Huang (no relation, strictly protect), a member of another Shenzhen expatriate Christian fellowship, told us that although his group had not officially registered with the Shenzhen RAB, it had experienced little supervision or intrusion into its activities. Huang, an American citizen and a Technology Manager at IBM Shenzhen, said that the fellowship held regular Sunday services in a private American school in Shenzhen's Shekou district, where many multinational corporations house their employees. Aside from the 2004 deportation of a Taiwan missionary, who had been aggressive in his evangelizing, Huang said that to his knowledge, no other expatriates had been detained or arrested by Shenzhen officials for religious reasons.

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